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ABSTRACT

Cohort differentiation has been posited to crystallize around periods of social crises and to be most impactful on the young adults of a given socio-historical period. The two most prominent socio-historical events in the pasts of today's older married persons were the Great Depression of the 1930's and World War II. Older married couples were studied to examine the relative influences of cohort differences and changes associated with number of years married. Instruments measuring love expression and marital problems were completed by 40 couples with 84% retest data obtained two years later. Data were arranged into six cohort groups according to year of marriage. Data analyses indicated cohort effects in areas of unexpressed feelings, money management problems, and consensus of spouses in identifying marital problems. Self-disclosure, tolerance, and problems focused on children and home labor declined across cohorts. The Depression cohort had the fewest money management problems and the highest degree of problem consensus. Both the Depression and the World War II cohorts had relatively higher levels of unexpressed feelings than other cohorts. The findings suggest that both generational and aging influences are important for understanding the nature of marital relationships in the later years. (Author/NRB)

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COHORT INFLUENCES IN OLDER MARRIAGES

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Studies of the qualitative nature of marital relationships across the family life cycle have reported consistent findings of decline after the honeymoon and through the childrearing years (e.g., Rollins & Feldman, 1970). However, beyond the middle years the findings become contradictory. One line of research suggests that the marital relationship progressively worsens, perhaps due to cumulative strain or to an inevitable process of disenchantment (e.g., Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Pineo, 1961). In contrast, other investigators have reported an upswing in marital quality in the middle and later years (e.g., Rollins & Feldman, 1970; Smart & Smart, 1975). This upswing roughly corresponds with the departure of the children from the home leading to a final period of conjugal life reminiscent of the early honeymoon years.

The majority of these studies have employed cross-sectional methodologies. Cross-sectional data confound age-related effects with cohort effects. A cohort refers to a group of persons entering a given social system at about the same point in time. Important cohort differences have been demonstrated in studies of the demography of the elderly (Cain, 1967) and studies of personality and intellectual development (e.g., Schaie & Strother, 1968; Baltes & Nesselroade, 1972).

Cohort differentiation is poisted to crystallize around periods of social crises and to be most impactful for the young adults of a given

socio-historical period (Ryder, 1965). It follows that significant social conditions affecting an emerging cohort of adults would also have influence for an emerging cohort of marriage relationships.

The two most prominent socio-historical events in the pasts of today's older marrieds were the Great Depression of the 1930's and World War II. A cohort perspective leads us to question how these events might have impacted young couples of those times, to what extent each period may have produced distinctive cohorts of married couples, and whether such distinctions have been maintained into the present.

From the popular and sociological literature of the 1930's and 1940's there are indications that cohort differences would most likely favor couples married during the Depression years in instrumental, problem-solving areas of marriage (e.g., Angell, 1936; Groves, 1935). Couples married during the years of World War II are suggested to have been more concerned with expressive aspects of their relationships (Burgess, 1942; Boulding, 1950).

The study I will report was an attempt to examine older marriage relationships in such a way as to distinguish between the relative contrabutions of cohort influences and changes over time (i.e., aging effects). Significant cohort influences were anticipated to be most evident in comparison between the cohorts of married couples represented by the Great Depression and World War II.

Subjects for the study were recruited from churches and a local Council on Aging. At the time of the initial data collection 80 subjects, or 40 couples, were selected. The average age was 61 years, with a range of 47 to 75 years. Number of years married ranged from 25 to 49 with a mean of 36 years. The spouses were predominantly white Protestant

with at least a high school education. Fifty percent of the husbands were retired. None of the couples had dependent children living at home full-time.

The design of the study was based on the general developmental model proposed by Schaie (1965). Data were collected by self-report instruments at two times of measurement over a two year interval. At the second time of measurement usable retest data was obtained from 67 (84%) of the original 80 subjects. A comparison of demographic data for the original and attrited samples suggested random drop-outs.

The dependent measures were gathered from two instruments specifically constructed for assessing dimensions of intimate relationships. The Scale of Feelings and Behavior of Love (or Love Scale) (Swenson, 1973) is a 120-item factored self-report instrument yielding an overall index score and six subscale scores: 1.) Verbal Expression of Affection; 2.) Self-disclosure; 3.) Tolerance; 4.) Moral Support; 5.) Unexpressed Feelings; and 6.) Material Support.

The Marriage Problems Scale (Swenson & Fiore, 1975) consists of 43 items representing six factorally distinct areas of marital problems common to both functional and dysfunctional marriages. The six subscales are: 1.) Problem-solving; 2.) Childrearing and Home Labor; 3.) Relatives and In-laws; 4.) Personal Care and Appearance; 5.) Money Management; and 6.) Friendships and Affection. In addition to indicating the frequency and severity of problems, the scale provides difference scores for each couple from an item-by-item comparison of husband's and wife's reports.

The data from these instruments were arranged into six cohort groups according to year of marriage. Cohorts were identified as Pre-Depression

(1926-1929); Depression (1930-1933); Recovery (1934-1937); Pre-WW II (1938-1941); WW II (1942-1945); and Post-War (1946-1950).

The data analyses involved a cross-sequential design with repeated measurements. Cohort X Time of Measurement analyses of variance for repeated measures were performed for each measurement variable.

The results of these analyses indicated significant cohort effects on the Unexpressed Feelings subscale of the Love Scale and on the Money Management subscale of the Marriage Problems Scale. For Unexpressed Feelings the cohort effect was nonlinear with couples married during the Depression years (1930-33) and during WW II (1942-45) having the greatest degree of nonverbalized emotional content in their relationships. Couples married within other cohorts scored lower on this measure with those from the Pre-Depression (1926-29) and Post-War (1946-50) cohorts reporting the east degree of unexpressed feelings.

For problems in Money Management the results showed that couples from the Depression cohort reported the fewest problems of all the cohort groups.

It was also found that the husband-wife differences on five of the seven Marriage Problems Scale scores produced significant cohort effects. These cohort effects generally favored the Depression cohort over the WW II cohort by having a greater consensus about defining problem areas irrespective of the number or severity of problems reported.

Time of Measurement effects in the cross-sequetial design reflect short-term longitudinal influences or changes over time. Significant effects were found for self-disclosure, tolerance, and problems around childrearing and home labor. Each of these effects showed a decline in scores over the two year interval.

To illustrate the relative influences of cohort and aging effects cross-sectional and short-term longitudinal gradients were plotted. Examples of these are shown in the figures in the handouts. Figure 1. shows the gradients for the Love Scale variable representing tolerance within the relationship. Consistent changes over time of measurement are indicated by the broken lines while the absence of cohort differences is represented by highly similar cross-sectional gradients. By comparison Figure 2. shows the presence of cohort differences for reports of Money Management problems. In this figure the longitudinal effects (broken lines) are neglegable while the cross-sectional differences are more strikingly apparent.

The evidence from this study is that <u>both</u> generational and aging influences are important for understanding the nature of marital relationships in the later years.

The findings pointing to cohort differences centered around the presence of unexpressed feelings, problems in money management, and the degree of consensus between spouses in defining problem areas. The expectation that cohort differences would favor the Depression cohort in instrumental functions and the WW II cohort in expressive functions was at best only partially correct.

In the area of Money Management it was found that couples married during the economic austerity of the early 1930's were much lower in their reports of money problems than were the WW II cohort or any other cohort. The Depression cohort was the low point in a roughly U-shaped curve. In general, the further removed a couple's wedding date from the period 1930-33, the more likely they were to report marital problems in the

area of finances. This would argue that the Great Depression was an influential instructor in financial matters and that for couples who learned the lessons well enough to remain married, its impact has been long-lasting. It also suggests that the impact of a major social crisis such as the Depression may become gradually diluted for subsequent cohorts.

The cohort differences found for unexpressed feelings were not in the expected directions. Rather than the WW II and Depression cohorts being differentiated on this dimension, these two cohorts were found to be highly similar. They were the most likely cohorts to report strong feelings in their relationships which were not being expressed to the spouse. More so than other cohorts in the study. The implication is that some common element or experience exists in periods of relative social instability which inhibits certain expressions of feelings. Rueben Hill (1958) argued that crises produce shifts in normal role patterns and the resultant changes may impede affectional and emotion-satisfying performances. It may be that one common, survival enhancing reaction to crisis is to invest less energy in emotional expressiveness in favor of more instrumental coping strategies. While the overall results from this study do not imply that the Depression and WW II cohorts are not as capable of emotional expressiveness, the results do indicate a tendency to be more selectively expressive than other cohorts.

With regard to the cohort effects found for the husband-wife difference scores from the Marriage Problems Scale, it appears that the Depression cohort has an advantage over the WW II cohort in being able to concur on what problems exist for the marriage. Such consensus would certainly serve an instrumental advantage for the successful management

of problems. It should also be noted, however, that except for the area of finances, the Depression cohort is not distinguished from the WW II cohort in the numbers of problems reported.

Turning now to the results indicating changes with years married, it was found that self-disclosure, tolerance, and problems around childrearing and home labor declined over time. The finding that self-disclosure in marital relationships declines is consistent with previous research (Burke & Weir, 1976). A reduction in disclosive behavior may reflect a moving away from the insense emotional interdependence which characterizes the earlier stages of marriage. Husbands and wives in older marriages have been observed to live relatively independent life styles (Maas & Kuypers, 1974). Increasing independence may call for less self-disclosure with no reduction satisfaction or love expression in older marriages. Lessening self-disclosure and the decline in the importance of tolerance may reflect an increasing sense of differentiation of self from spouse as well as an accompanying acceptance of personal differences. The need for close emotional interdependence is reduced and so the couple gradually shifts certain dimensions of their relationship to accomodate their differences.

A marital cohort is a much more complex phenomena than the present study is able to outline. A cohort may be considered an interaction of influences from the formative years of the relationship, of factors influencing the decision to join the ranks of the married during a given era, and of factors which facilitate the success of relationships throughout their histories. This study points to usefulness of cohort perspectives in investigating the development of intimate relationships. It is

a mistake to assume that any current generation of older persons will provide a constant picture of what to expect for successive future generations.

Future studies of cohort differentiation would do well to gather retrospective data on the periods under study. An individual's personal definition of significant historical events should be considered. Cohort research with younger groups is also needed since theoretically the period influences are greatest in the early adult years. Finally, it would be valuable to compare factor structures over time for different cohorts.

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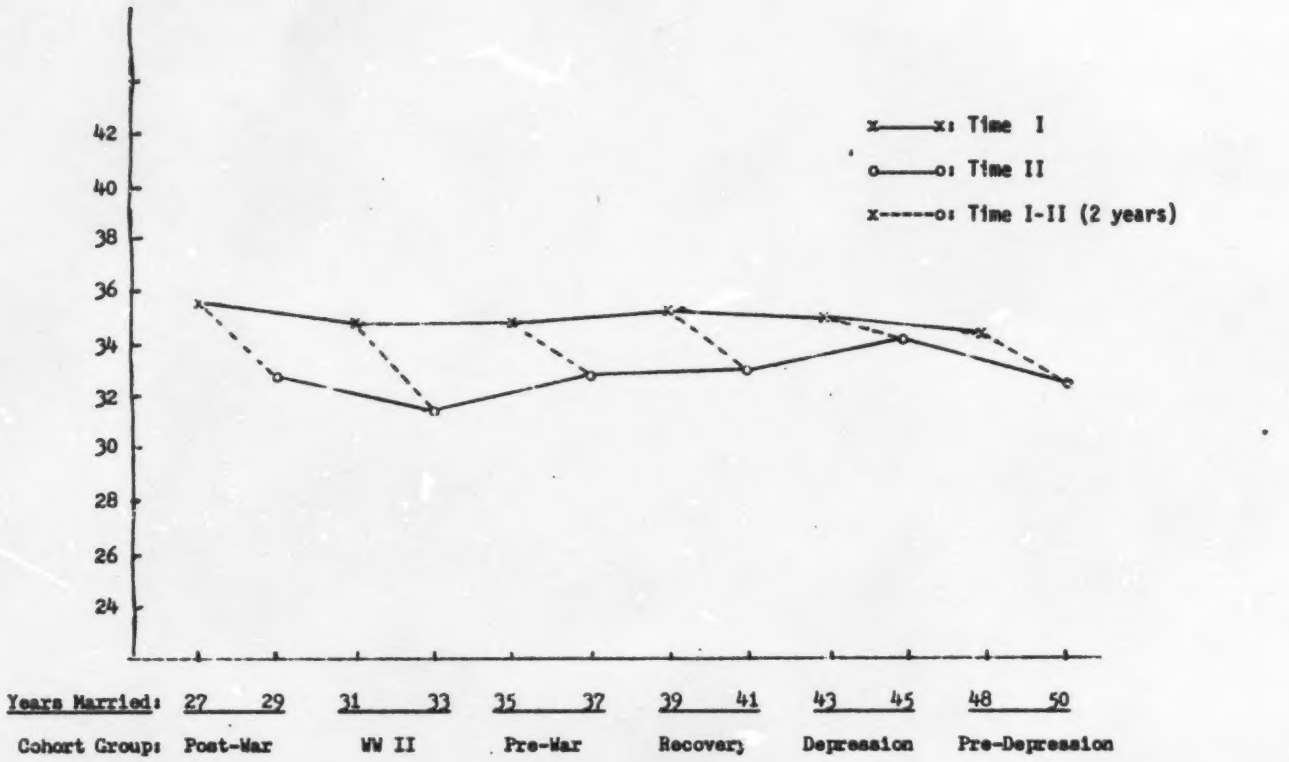

Figure 1. Comparative cross-sectional and short-term longitudinal gradients for Tolerance (Love Scale subscale 3.) illustrating time effects.

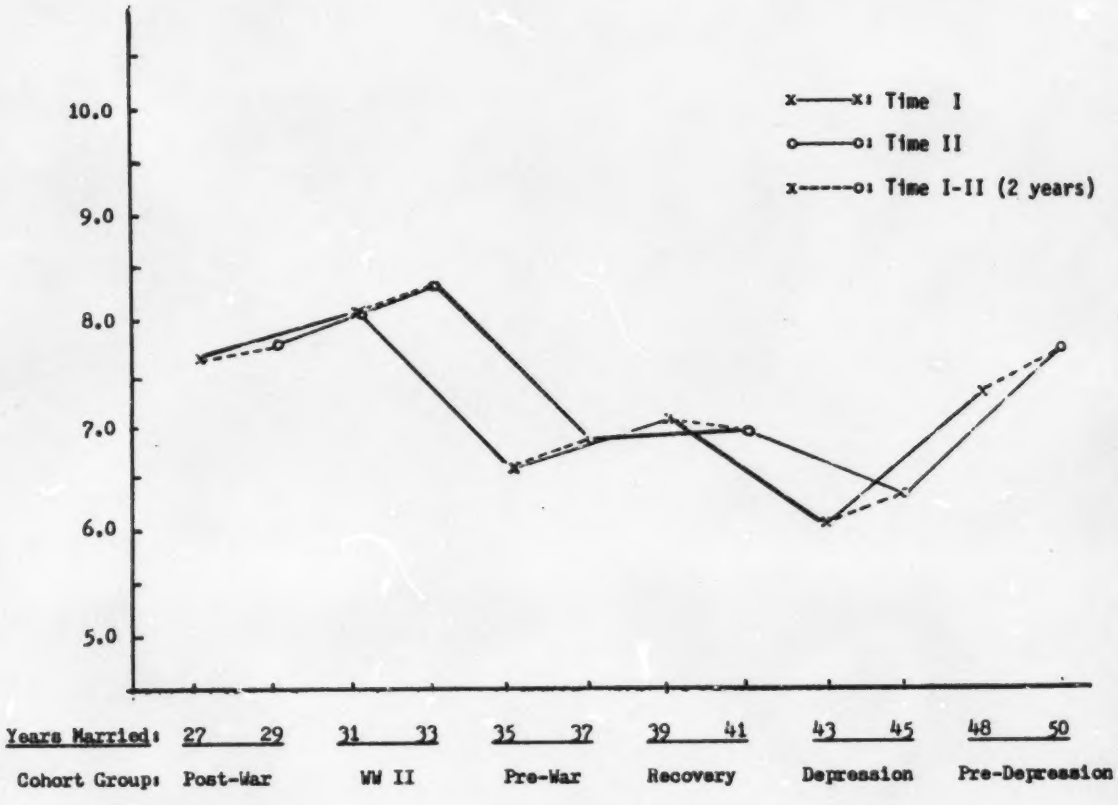

Figure 2. Comparative cross-sectional and short-term longitudinal gradients for Money Management (Marriage Problems subscale 5.) illustrating cohort differences.